



Lab Rats by Origamidragons

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Summary: What if six children escaped Hawkins Lab that fateful night, not one?

1. every bond you break

The room was dark, the only illumination coming from the flashing red lights embedded in the walls. Alarms scraped and grated at their ears, and the lost children huddled closer together, hands squeezing tight.

There were five of them in the room. One was missing.

The lights were bright and the alarms were piercingly loud, and the children were terrified. One of them was crying softly, and another wrapped her arms around his shoulders and buried her face in his chest.

The boy nearest the door noticed first. There was a crack of darkness running the length of the door, between the door and the frame. He reached out a hand, tentative and cautious, and touched it.

It swung silently open, perfectly balanced on its hinges.

The children exchanged startled glances. The door was open. If she had had the words to do so, the girl could have explained that the electricity that powered the locks had failed, due to a catastrophe deeper in the facility. She could not have explained how she knew this, either, but she did.

The other children did not know this, and they didn't need to. All they knew was this:

The door was open, the defenses down.

They could leave. It might be their only chance to escape. But...

They were missing someone.

They couldn't leave without her.

They all understood this with the silent, natural telepathy granted to a group of friends who had spent all their lives together, and also with the decidedly unnatural telepathy granted by highly illegal and secretive experimentation.

The lights in the hallway were flickering madly as they filed silently out of the room, bare feet light on the cold floor. They kept close together, moving in a tight knot. The boy who had opened the door took the lead.

There was a long smear of blood down the wall opposite them. The boy in front averted his eyes quickly. He knew that it had to have come from one of their tormentors, one of the guards who dragged them down the long hallways, but he still didn't like to see it. He tried to shepherd the others away quicker.

Every instinct screamed against it, but he lead them deeper into the innards of the building, down hallways and flights of stairs. The facility, usually so busy, was deserted, and the ragged breathing of the frightened children was the only sound audible besides the blaring of the alarms.

Still they pressed on, towards the room they all dreaded, the room where they knew their missing sister to be. The testing room.

There was a body. The boy leading the way ground to a halt, throwing one arm out to signal a stop. The body was one the boy recognized; one of the women who had come in the day before as 'observers.' The children had disliked them immediately. They had had greedy eyes and had poked and prodded at the children as though they were livestock to be bought and sold.

Those eyes weren't greedy and hungry anymore, though. They were just blank, holding a memory of awful terror. The boy couldn't bring himself to hate her anymore. He bent down and gently closed her eyelids. His fingers came away bloody.

At an unspoken signal, they moved on.

The lights were strobing now, flashing wildly as though in warning. They passed more bodies, more pools of blood congealing on the floor. They tried to step around them at first, but soon there were simply too many to avoid, and they were forced to walk through. Their bare feet left bloody footprints behind them on the rare patches of clean floor.

The air was getting colder. It happened gradually, so that the children didn't notice at first, but as they approached the testing rooms, the chill became biting. The boy in front could see his breath.

He hated the cold.

He cupped his hands in front of his chest and concentrated, screwing his eyes shut. After a tense moment, a small flame bloomed to life in his hands, lighting his face with a warm red glow and dispelling the cold, driving it back momentarily.

He held the fire in one hand and raised the other to wipe his nose, painting a bloody stripe across the back of it.

The air was full of floating somethings, tiny white motes that landed on the children's skin. Had they ever been outdoors, they would have compared them to snow.

The elevator was painted with blood, splattered across the floor, the walls, the ceiling. On the ceiling was something else as well- an unidentifiable wet patch that seemed to throb and pulse. The children watched it apprehensively for a moment, but the pull of their sister was stronger, and they boarded the elevator.

The buttons were dark, but as the red-haired girl reached out to press them, they flickered to life. She pushed the down arrow, and down they went.

It was there that they found their sister, struggling down the hall, supporting herself with one hand on the wall. She was soaked, and her face was covered with blood, spilling from her nostrils and dripping from her chin onto the floor. The expression in her eyes was one of pure relief when she saw them. As if she'd thought she'd had to escape on her own. As if she'd thought they'd ever leave her.

The boy took her hand and helped her to stand, supporting her with one arm, letting the sputtering flame in his hand warm her wet and shaking from.

It's okay. We're here now. We're here.

The strongest of the boys picked her up, and her head drooped onto

his shoulder as she finally succumbed to bone-deep exhaustion.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, half-conscious. "I didn't mean to."

He squeezed her hand, comforting and understanding and caring.

They were together again, all six of them, the way it was meant to be, the way it always had been.

They were together, and all the doors were open.

The way back up was easier, because it no longer felt like they were falling deeper and deeper into a hole with something cruel and awful waiting at the bottom. Instead, they were ascending, finally leaving the place where they had been imprisoned for so long. Every step they took away from the testing rooms, the air grew warmer, and the weights on their chests fell away.

One of the surviving guards tried to stop them at the door, but they were too close to the freedom they had longed for, too high on the idea of it, to be denied now. The red haired girl flung her hand out on impulse and a jagged bolt of lightning flashed across the room, sending the guard flying like a rag doll. He hit the window behind him so hard a spiderweb of cracks ran across it.

The girl swayed on her feet, eyes drooping, blood running from both nostrils. The dark-skinned boy was at her side in an instant and caught her before she could collapse, supporting her over his shoulders.

When they stepped outside, it was raining, great buckets pouring down from the sky, washing the blood from their skin, letting them feel clean and alive for the first time in far too long. Before, their experiences with water were harsh, cold showers and the claustrophobic darkness of the bathtub. This was different. It was so, so different. It was gentle, and cool, and cleansing.

It felt like freedom on their skin.

2. every single day

Jonathan Byers blinked awake slowly, then all at once when the scent of smoke reached his nose. He tumbled gracelessly out of bed, and almost sprinted out his door. When he reached the hallway, he averted his eyes from the closed door to Will's room out of long-worn habit.

When he reached the kitchen, he looked around worriedly. He didn't see any fire, which was good. His mother was standing at the stove, poking at something on a pan.

"Mom?" Jonathan asked carefully, still on edge.

She swung around, still holding the pan. "Jonathan! Good morning! I, um, I tried to make bacon," she said with a sheepish smile, holding out the pan so he could see. Sure enough, there were five strips of blackened bacon sizzling on the cast iron. "They got a little burned."

Jonathan's shoulders slumped in poorly-disguised relief, and he felt the careful, fixed smile on his face melt into something much more genuine. Today was a Good Day, then.

Jonathan categorized his mother's behavior, day by day, into three categories. Good Days, Okay Days, and Bad Days. Good Days, like today, were when she seemed fine, and did something like make breakfast or clean the house unprompted. When everything was like it should be. On Okay Days, which were by far the most common, she was quieter, distracted, and frequently ended up calling Hopper.

On Bad Days... well, the last bad day had been a week ago, and Jonathan had had to leave school to pick her up from where she'd collapsed raving in the supermarket.

But today was one of the rare Good Days, and he watched for a moment longer as she fussed over the burned bacon, just drinking in the sight of her when she was at her best, before she ordered him into his seat and poured him a glass of orange juice.

It was the Good Days that made the Bad Days worth it. Jonathan

loved his mother, he really did. He'd much rather live with her and act as her caretaker, and put up with being known as the kid with the crazy mom, than the alternative. The alternative was getting sent to live with Lonnie in Indianapolis, and he didn't want that.

She was a good mother, and she loved her sons. That was the problem.

The problem was that Joyce Byers only had one son. The problem was that Joyce Byers thought she had two.

Jonathan slid into his seat and she set a plate of scrambled eggs and burned bacon in front of him before sitting down across from him.

"Did you take your medicine this morning?" he asked, knowing it was an awful, tactless question and needing to ask it anyways.

"Yes," she said, pointing at him with her fork. "I'm going to do better at that from now on. I promise. I owe you that much."

Jonathan was relieved beyond words. Her medication had been adjusted recently, and she'd resisted taking it because, in her words, they were 'trying to make her forget.' He didn't need to ask iwhat/i she thought they were trying to make it forget.

It was Will. The ghost who'd lived in their house for twelve years, haunting the corners and driving his mother insane. The little brother he'd never had. Jonathan had been five when his brother was born dead, sitting in the waiting room as his mother screamed and sobbed.

It wasn't that he didn't miss his brother. He did. He'd done his mourning and moved on. His mother hadn't. She couldn't. She insisted, consistently, that Will was still alive. That he'd been stolen away by the scientists at Hawkins Lab, that they'd taken him to use as a weapon or a spy or something else, like something out of a conspiracy movie.

Jonathan was just so tired of hearing about Will. He was tired of walking past a dead boy's room every morning.

On the worst days, when she was screaming in the supermarket or curled in the corner, he found himself wishing Will would die for

real, that his ghost would stop haunting their house and let him have his mother back.

"Thanks, Mom," he said, and meant it.

Behind them, unbeknownst to him, Joyce's morning pill disappeared down the drain.

Nancy Wheeler was a perfect girl. She had perfect grades and a perfect smile and perfect hair. She was popular without being mean, she had a boyfriend, she had a baby sister and her parents were together and everything about her life was *perfect*.

Right?

So long as you ignored the baby brother that never was, everything was perfect.

Nancy's parents were masters of the Stepford Smile. They were *happy*, and *fine*, and *in love*. They had their two perfect daughters in their perfect house at the end of the cul de sac, and everything was *fine*. Yes, they'd lost a son, but they were perfectly stable, perfectly *normal*, and nothing at all like crazy Joyce Byers up on the hill.

Nancy saw Jonathan Byers out of the corner of her eye, and immediately felt guilty for what she'd thought about his mother. He walked with his head down, staring fixedly at the dirty hallway floor, scuffed by hundreds of pairs of shoes, his shoulders bowed like there was a heavy weight on his shoulders.

Nancy chewed on his lower lip for a moment, tasting strawberry lip gloss, considering whether to approach him, to ask him what was wrong (or *don't*, *jesus*, what was wrong with her, everyone in town knew what was wrong). She'd just made up her mind to do so when Barb rounded the corner and started towards her and the opportunity vanished.

Jonathan glanced up, met her eyes for a heartbeat, then looked away and moved on. Nancy felt inexplicably guilty, then berated herself for feeling that way.

So instead, she gossiped with Barb about Steve who was definitely not her boyfriend, and invited her to his party, and got a note in her locker and kissed Steve in the second-floor girl's bathroom, and tried her hardest to be normal, perfect Nancy.

Her mother and father had been in the hospital room, but she'd been in the hallway, waiting anxiously to know what had happened. She'd seen the nurse carry her stillborn baby brother out, and she'd heard his weak cries.

They said he wasn't breathing when he was born.

She knew they were lying.

She was late to first period.

Jim Hopper had grown accustomed to the regular delusional phone calls from Joyce Byers. It had become part of his routine- wake up with a splitting headache, chase it off with whiskey and painkillers, get dressed, arrive late to work, eat a donut before Flo could catch him and replace it with an apple, and get a call from Joyce Byers about how her son wasn't really dead.

He was in no way qualified to act as her therapist. He'd encouraged her, many times, to see a professional to help her work through everything, and she'd even gone to a few appointments he'd helped her set up, but never stuck with it.

He always felt like a hypocrite when he did that anyways, considering his own preferred method of therapy came out of a bottle.

Taking her calls seemed like the least he could do. He knew what it was to lose a kid, after all, and he could still be there as a friend, if nothing else.

"She call yet?" he asked Flo as he ducked into the station. He didn't need to clarify who 'she' was.

"Yep," she confirmed. "Jim, there was also a call from-"

He was already turning away, tuning out the incoming lecture. He

grabbed a chocolate doughnut and took a bite before she could stop him. He had the Byers' phone number by memory.

She picked up on the first ring, and he imagined that meant she'd been sitting by the phone waiting for him to call.

"Hey, Joyce," he said.

"Hey, Hop."

"What's going on?" he asked, always the first question he asked when she called. The answers varied wildly, but it always got her talking about what was on her mind.

"Don't laugh."

"I never do."

"I think something *happened* last night, Hop. At the lab."

"Yeah?"

"There were alarms. Going off. And lights flashing, and-"

"Joyce," Hopper interrupted carefully. "Why were you at the lab?"

Silence on the other end of the line. Hopper raised a hand to his head and rubbed his temples with forefinger and thumb, closing his eyes. His headache had not abated, and this conversation was only serving to aggravate it.

"Joyce, we talked about this. It's *trespassing*. You have to stop doing that."

"I didn't stay long," she mumbled. Sometimes Hopper felt like he was talking to a little kid when he spoke with her. "And I didn't even cross the fence. I just... needed to see."

"Goddammit, Joyce. One of these days you'll get caught, and then they can press charges. We both know you can't afford a legal battle like that. I get that you're willing to risk it, I do, but think about Jonathan for a damn minute, would you? What would that do to him

if you went to prison?"

Flo was waving for his attention. He held up a finger to signal *one minute*, and she replied by holding up the phone and mouthing *it's important*.

"Listen, Joyce, I gotta go, there's something important-"

"Just," she cut him off, "look into it? Please, Hopper. I really think there's something there this time. For me."

How many times had he heard that now? *There's something this time. I have proof this time. This time I know it's real. Look into it. Please.*

"Alright, Joyce," he said with an exhausted sigh. "Talk to you later."

"Thanks, Hop."

He hung up the phone with a click and sat there for a moment, feeling the headache abate slightly now that that conversation was over with.

Flo waved for his attention again, and he levered himself to his feet with a grunt and went to see what was so important. He was expecting another story about a stupid group of teenagers drinking underage or something like that, something barely worth his time.

Nothing ever happened in Hawkins, anyway.

"Call from Benny's," was what she said instead. "I think you need to go there right away."

"Oh, *Jesus*," Hopper swore when he saw the scene of the crime. The diner's usual warm aroma of grease, meat and cheese had been replaced by the rotting stench of decay, and there were flies buzzing lazily through the air, crawling over the body. Benny was sprawled across the table, gunshot wound in the side of his head, pistol in his hand.

"What the hell," Callahan echoed from behind him, seemingly without a smart remark for once in his life. "Suicide?"

Hopper didn't answer immediately, tuning out his officers and looking around the room. It was a real mess. There was a massive blood spatter on one of the walls, probably from the gunshot, but...

Hopper's thoughts trailed off. It was on the wrong wall. If Benny had shot himself in the side of the head, where the entry wound was, the blood should have sprayed in the direction of the kitchen. But it hadn't. It was behind him.

With that fact slotted into place, he could see the iwrongness/i of the crime scene clearly. There were pots and pans scattered across the kitchen floor, and what looked like a scorch mark near one of the walls. There was something else, too. Hopper frowned, and crouched down on his haunches to get a better look.

There were dragging marks on the dirty floor, all leading out the door. Almost like someone had been towing bodies away.

"Chief?" Powell asked from behind him. Hopper stood again, shaken out of his reverie, and turned to face him.

"It's not a suicide. Something's wrong here."

"Well, what else could it be? Murder? Everyone loved Benny. And besides, Chief, this is iHawkins/i, remember?"

I think something happened last night, Hop.

"Find everyone who was in the diner over the last few days," he said instead, his tone leaving no room for argument. "Ask them if they saw anything suspicious."

Something was very, very wrong.

3. every move you make

"Did Benny seem... depressed at all, when you were there?"

The witness- Hopper had already forgotten his name- shook his head emphatically. "No sir, chief. Benny was as friendly as ever. Big smile. He and some of the boys and I were planning a fishing trip for the weekend."

"Was there anyone there you didn't know? Anyone suspicious, maybe?"

The man frowned for a second, screwing up his bearded face in exaggerated thought. "Uh, I don't think so."

Hopper sighed and began to look away. There had been five men in the diner that day, so far as he'd been able to tell, and this was the fifth. The other four hadn't been able to tell him anything, and it seemed like this one was going to be exactly as unhelpful.

"Wait."

Hopper stilled. "What?"

"Well, I don't know if it's what you're looking for, but... there were those kids."

Hopper's head snapped back around, all his attention on the man once more. This was the first real lead he'd had all day. "What kids?"

The man shifted uncomfortably. "I mean, I didn't get a good look-"

"What. Kids."

"There were a few of them. Looked like they'd been sleeping in the woods or something. Real short hair, wearing... I don't know. Looked almost like those plastic dresses they give sick people."

"Hospital gowns?" Hopper repeated incredulously.

"Yeah, maybe. I don't know, man, like I said, I only saw three of 'em."

Couldn't even tell you if they were boys or girls."

-Before-

The children slept in the woods. The youngest of the boys, the one with '012' tattooed on his wrist, had closed his eyes for a long moment and seen a place where they could find shelter, and so they'd gone, to a place where an overhang was formed by a fallen tree that sheltered them from the elements and kept them from view.

They scraped together a pile of fallen leaves and dry sticks, and the boy who had led them out of the facility, concentrating carefully, let sparks spill from his fingers and set the tinder ablaze. The flames licked at the sticks, then caught, and soon the children were huddled around a small but merry fire.

In another life, that boy's name would have been Mike Wheeler, but that is not the world this story takes place in. In this world, that boy had only ever been known as Six, and he had no idea that he had an older sister nearby who was trying desperately not to think about him.

"We made it," he said aloud, the first words any of them had spoken since their escape. In the facility, where they could be punished cruelly for speaking out of turn, silence had been their shield. To speak freely, finally, outside the safety of their heads, was liberating.

"We made it," he repeated, and the words moved in a wave around the campfire as the tired, dirty, and if free/i children echoed them, their voices soft and rough from disuse. There was more to discuss, and to plan, and to do, but for the moment all that seemed far away and unimportant compared to the warmth of the fire, the nearness of friends, and the overwhelming drowsiness darkening their vision.

They slept that way, curled together, as the rain slowed and became a drizzle, and as their campfire burned down to ashes. As the clouds cleared in the early hours of the morning and stars the children had never seen before shone down from above, they slept, and guarded each other against nightmares of sharp scalpels and gloved hands.

The day dawned cold and grey, the thin sunlight of autumn shining through the gaps between bare branches.

When they woke late in the morning, they were hungry. Hunger was far from a new sensation for any of the six- their health and happiness had never been a priority for the men holding them prisoner- but they had always known they would be fed eventually./i Not anymore. If they didn't find food, they wouldn't eat.

They were free, and they agreed, unanimously, that that was a good thing. It was something they had hungered for as long as any of them could remember. However, equally undeniable was another fact: with freedom came danger.

They were free, but in leaving their prison, they had also left a place that was, in its twisted way, the only home they had ever known. Aside from each other, they were utterly alone.

They would make their own way. So long as they had each other, they could do that. They could do anything.

Six liked Benny Hammond. He had a friendly, genuine smile, and despite his intimidating appearance, was very gentle with the children who had slunk into his diner in ratty, dirt-smeared hospital gowns, holding hands like they'd die if they let go.

The plan had been this: Six, Eleven and Twelve would go inside and try to get something to eat, and the other three would stand guard outside. This plan had rather predictably flown off the rails moments after the three entered the diner, when they were caught in the kitchen. They'd flinched back, Six trying to put himself in front of his brother and sister, but Benny had seen their terror and any anger he might have held towards them evaporated. After a halting conversation, in which the children didn't know enough words and Benny didn't know which questions to ask, they'd managed to reach a tentative deal.

They told him, in fumbling speech, their names (numbers) and that they had come from someplace very bad. The sympathy on Benny's face made Six wonder if maybe he had come from someplace bad as well. He had set them up with a pile of hamburgers and French fries,

then left to 'place a call.'

Eleven had stared at the too-small tables for a moment, then jerked her head to one side and four of them flew together. That was where they sat, stuffing their faces with diner food, eyes widening at the taste.

Six had never eaten what Benny called 'French fries' before, but he decided he loved them. They had a flavor entirely unlike the tasteless meals that had made up his diet until that point, salty and greasy and warm.

After a while, Benny rejoined them, laughing softly at the amount of food they'd managed to consume. "Guess you guys were really hungry, huh?" he said. Six nodded rapidly, mouth full of hamburger.

"I called some people who're gonna take care of you guys, okay? Child Protective Services. They're going to make sure you're safe and fed, and they'll make sure the fu- the bad people who did this to you will get caught and punished. Sound good?"

The children exchanged looks and thoughts around the table. Food and safety and justice did sound good. It sounded amazing. Six looked back at Benny and nodded his assent.

"Good," Benny said with a decisive nod. "You kids ever have milkshakes?"

That was when Twelve, the boy who had been born Will Byers, began to scream, and all of the children immediately looked to him in alarm and terror. All of them had... abilities. Eleven could move things without touching them, and Six could create fire from nothing.

Twelve saw things before they happened.

"*They're here!*" he wailed, eyes screwed shut. "*They're here!*"

A bullet hole appeared in Benny's forehead, splattering the wall behind him with gruesome red. Nine, the girl who could have been Max Mayfield, made a despairing, moaning scream, and buried her face in Ten's shoulder.

The diner exploded into chaos. Both doors flew open, and soldiers holding stun-guns charged in, boots loud and heavy on the greasy floor. Six threw out a hand and the first soldiers were burned alive by a jet of fire, leaving a scorch mark on the floor that would later bewilder Jim Hopper the next morning. It sapped his strength, and he sagged against Eleven's shoulder as the smaller girl struggled to support him.

The soldiers just kept coming, stepping over the bodies of their fallen comrades.

Across the room, he saw Nine make a sharp gesture, and the stun-guns of the men near her exploded, electricity arcing up and down their bodies before they collapsed like puppets with cut strings.

The soldiers just kept coming, stepping over the bodies of their fallen comrades.

Six suddenly saw clearly that this was a fight they couldn't win. For all their powers, they were just six children. They couldn't stand against an endless supply of trained soldiers sent to recapture them.

"Run!" he screamed, voice cracking. "Split up and *run*!"

He grabbed Eleven's hand, and they ran.

-Now-

"This is the night of the seventh?" Hopper asked, watching the surveillance footage closely.

The suited man gave him a nod of confirmation. The grainy video ran for a few more seconds, then cut out completely. Hopper blinked.

"That's it?"

"I told you," the man said, looking insufferably smug. Hopper wanted to punch the smirk off of his face. "Nothing happened that day. We had a minor security system malfunction, but nothing else. Is there anything else I can help you with, Sheriff?"

"It's *Chief*, and I do have one more question. You don't have any kids

around here, do you?"

There was just a moment of shocked recognition in the man's eyes before he rearranged his face back into the same bland, indulgent smile, so quickly Hopper almost missed it. "Of course not, Chief Hopper. This is no place for children."

Hopper left Hawkins Lab certain of two things.

One: It had rained on the night of the seventh. It had *poured*. And yet there were no signs of the storm on the recording he'd been shown.

Two: He was being lied to.

Jonathan Byers was in the woods, his camera a reassuringly heavy weight against his chest. These nighttime excursions of his had become more and more common lately. Between his mother's deteriorating condition and school restarting, the woods had become his refuge, the place where he could be alone and relax with nothing expected of him, free from the judgmental eyes of his classmates and the pressures of caring for his mother.

He liked being invisible, liked seeing without being seen.

He raised the camera and snapped another picture of the girl sitting on the diving board, feet dangling in the pool as steam rose from the warm water into the cold autumn air. She looked lonely.

Jonathan could sympathize. He was intimately familiar with loneliness.

The camera clicked and he looked down to rewind it, just for a moment. When he looked up again, she was gone, and the light in the pool was out. She must have gone inside. He pushed himself to his feet, legs cramped after spending more than an hour crouched awkwardly in the bushes, and started back through the woods towards his house.

The noise of a few rustling leaves and a stick snapping beneath a bare foot was the only notice he got before he found himself staring at two kids, propping each other up. They were stick-thin, with shaved

heads and big eyes in hollow-cheeked faces. One of them had dried blood crusted beneath his nose, and had placed himself defensively in front of the other.

"Hey," Jonathan said carefully, acutely aware of the terror in their eyes and stances, like they could bolt at any minute. He found himself focusing on the one in front. There was something distantly familiar in those features, like an echo of someone he knew.

"I'm not gonna hurt you," he promised, unconsciously switching to the way he spoke to his mother on her worst days: carefully and patiently, like he was addressing a wounded, wild animal that could flee or bite at one wrong move. "Are- are you okay? Do you have someplace to go?"

The one in back- a girl, Jonathan thought, but he wasn't sure- shook her head slowly.

"Okay. Listen. My car is nearby. I can take you home, get you some food and a place to sleep, and- figure it out." He could call the chief. He would know what to do. How to find their parents, or their homes, or... something. If it wasn't their parents who'd done this, which was an idea that made him feel sick. They looked battered and exhausted, and the part of him that had never gotten to be a big brother wanted to see them safe.

The boy murmured something. Jonathan had to strain to make it out. "Find... friends?"

"You're looking for your friends?" Jonathan checked.

The boy nodded, looking like he was about to cry.

"Okay. We'll find your friends. Promise."

"Promise?" the girl repeated back, and the look of confusion on her face broke Jonathan's heart.

"Yeah," he said, bending down slightly to look her in the eye. "Promise. It's something you can't ever break."

"Promise," she whispered to herself, testing out the word. She met his

eyes, and nodded once with a solemnity beyond her years. Jonathan had the distinct feeling that a pact had just been sealed.

"Alright. Let's go."

Twelve was lost, and all alone. His brothers and sisters had fled the ambush successfully, and he took some small measure of comfort in that, but he was still cold, and lost, and very alone.

He hadn't been truly alone, away from all of his brothers and sisters, for a very long time. Longer than he could remember. Even when they'd been locked up in their rooms, they were still close enough to sense over their shared connection. Now, however, they were too far away even for that. He could only get the vaguest of senses of them.

If nothing else, they were all alive. He would know if they weren't.

He hugged himself tightly, trying to warm himself against the creeping nighttime chill. His bare feet were cold, and the slimy feeling of wet leaves on his skin made him shudder.

His foot caught on a root hidden under the layer of fallen leaves and he crashed to the ground, knocking the wind from his lungs and biting his tongue hard enough to taste iron. He whimpered involuntarily and rolled over, and a fat red drop of blood fell from his mouth and dripped to the ground.

Suddenly, without warning, a vision flashed across his eyes of a faceless head that opened like a gruesome flower to reveal a gaping mouth studded all the way around with teeth. The image cleared after a moment, and he bit back a scream. If he'd seen it, it was coming. He only had seconds. He shoved himself to his feet and sprinted through the silent forest, unsure where he was going except iaway/i.

He could hear iit/i moving through the trees behind him, and he tried to run faster, but it always sounded like it was just steps behind him.

iHelp!/i he cried out to his friends, but there was no one around to

hear.

The trees were thinning out. He could see a halo of orange light cast by a streetlight. Just a little further. If he could reach that light, he'd be safe.

He turned to look over his shoulder, and was greeted by the open mouth from his vision, an image from a nightmare.

The monster pounced.

The streetlight flickered, then went out.

4. every night you stay

They all felt it when Twelve vanished. A wave of pure, overwhelming fear crashed over their connection, then his presence, already faint from distance, vanished almost entirely, leaving only the barest of impressions in the backs of their minds.

Jonathan pulled the car over when he heard soft crying from the backseat. The girl had buried her face in her hands, shoulders shaking, and the boy was pressed against his side as close as he could get, arms wrapped around her midsection.

She looked up at him through her fingers, eyes swollen and red, face solemn. "Friend... gone."

He understood.

This was a bad idea. This was an *emphatically* bad idea. This was the exact thing that Hopper had told Joyce to stop doing, and he really needed to take his own damn advice and leave well enough alone when it came to Hawkins Lab.

But between Joyce's stories about the place, Benny's murder and everything wrong with the crime scene, stories about shaved kids in hospital gowns, and now falsified security footage... well. If nothing else, it was worth checking out. Maybe Joyce was onto something after all.

He ducked through the hole he'd chopped in the chain-link fence, resting one hand carefully on the handle of his service pistol, and started towards the building.

The laboratory was eerily quiet, and Hopper's booted footsteps sounded too loud in the silence. The fluorescent lights were dimmed for the night, but he still felt uncomfortably exposed in the open hallways. He was acutely aware of how many laws he was breaking here, for the sole purpose of indulging a delusional woman's fantasies.

Except that wasn't the only reason, and he knew it. There was also all the bizarre details of Benny's death, and eyewitness accounts of children with shaved heads straight out of some conspiracy film, and that bullshit security footage they'd tried to pass off as real when he'd attempted to question them legitimately.

He rounded a corner and found himself looking down a long corridor lined with metal doors. Each had a number carved into it: 001 through 012. The first five or so were empty, as was number eight, but the remaining six looked disturbingly like children's rooms, albeit very empty and sterile ones. Room nine had a couple of toy cars, and room ten had a few books about animals. Room twelve was practically wallpapered with impressively detailed crayon drawings. Room eleven had a stuffed animal of some kind, and room seven had some toy soldiers. Room six had, of all things, an old Dungeons and Dragons monster manual and dungeon master's guide, and some dice.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered under his breath, utterly disgusted. He hadn't believed Joyce. He hadn't wanted to. Experiments on little kids? Who could be cruel enough to do that? But he couldn't deny the evidence in front of his eyes. He felt sick. How long had this been going on? Ten years? More? Joyce's stillbirth had been eleven or twelve years ago, he thought, so if her son really was... part of all this, it had to have been at least that long.

The same age Sarah would be, he thought, and had to force himself to loosen his white-knuckled fingers on the handle of his gun. He hoped he wouldn't run into any personnel. In the mood he was in, he wasn't sure if he'd be able to stop himself from shooting.

The halls were perfectly clean and white, with no sign of the bloody footprints six children had left not so long before. The illusion of clean efficiency was only spoiled by the plastic biohazard curtains blocking off sections of the building. He'd noticed them earlier that day, on his more legitimate visit. He shoved one aside and moved into the quarantine zone.

He drew his gun and proceeded with more caution than before down into the bowels of the building. He was under no illusions as to his likelihood of survival if he was caught.

He stepped into an elevator and stabbed the down button with more force necessary, noting with no small amount of apprehension the three different layers of sheet metal that slid into place as the door closed.

Whatever was down there, they sure as hell didn't want it getting out.

He stepped out of the elevator slowly. The air was full of floating particles, drifting lazily. Hopper half-wished he'd brought something to cover his face- god know if that crap was toxic or radioactive or something else- but if he left now there was no guarantee he'd ever be able to get back in. He had to press on.

After about a hundred feet of clean floor and toxic air, the hallway opened into a large, round room. The first thing Hopper noticed was the tank. It was big- not big enough for an adult, but a child could fit comfortably. One of the sides was shattered, and the bottom six inches or so still held lukewarm salt water.

The second thing he noticed was the wound.

That was the only way he could describe it. There was a gaping, pulsing *wound* in the far wall. He took a few careful steps closer, until he was close enough to touch it. It looked like it was made of something stringy and translucent, almost like mucus, and it was *spreading*. As he looked, he saw the tentacle-like growths crawl a little further along the walls.

He reached out and touched it, caught someplace between fascinated horror and complete disgust. The strands of mucus stretching across the opening resisted for a moment, then parted. He pulled his hand back.

Something stung him in the neck. He blinked and brought his hand up in pure impulse. When he pulled it away, dark blood glistened on his fingers.

His vision began to go fuzzy as he tried to turn around, but his legs suddenly didn't want to support his weight, and he collapsed onto his side, fighting to free his gun with unresponsive fingers.

He was able to make out a few blurry white shapes, and then the world went dark.

Jonathan had never been in Will's room before. He had never been *forbidden* to enter, but the room was treated with the sort of respect you would give a shrine or a sacred place. Jonathan didn't go in there, and neither did his mother. Besides, the presence of Will's ghost was strong enough in the rest of the house.

If it were up to him, he'd never go in. It was a painful reminder of the splinter in their family, the injury that wouldn't heal, the one that had driven his mother insane with denial and grief. But the kids needed someplace to sleep, and he wanted to keep his mother out of the matter entirely, and Will's room was the only one she never entered.

So he pushed the door open carefully, and stepped inside.

"This was my brother's room," he quietly informed the kids, who were examining their surroundings with watchful, curious eyes.

The air was thick with dust, a soft coating over every exposed surface. Behind him, one of the kids sneezed. Jonathan grimaced. The walls were painted a soft blue with ivory trim, and there was a small bed in one corner piled with blankets and stuffed animals, still waiting for a baby boy that had never come home. Next to it was a lamp on a table. Jonathan switched it on and the room was lit with soft yellow light that illuminated the dust motes dancing in the air.

One of the children whispered something behind him, too quiet for Jonathan to hear. "*Brother.*"

"What are your names?" he asked, adding after a moment of silence, "...do you have names? I'm Jonathan."

The two shared a look, then the boy slowly extended his wrist. Jonathan had to squint to read the numbers- they were *tattooed*, who did that to a *kid*- in the low lighting.

"Six? Is that... your name?"

The boy nodded, then pointed at the girl and said, "Eleven."

Jonathan started to answer, maybe to ask why they had numbers instead of names or who gave them to them, but before he could, he was interrupted.

"Jonathan?" his mother's sleepy voice called from down the hall, and he froze, gesturing frantically for the children to be quiet. They just looked confused. "Is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me," he answered after a moment, voice strained. "Just got home."

"Were you talking to someone?"

"No, Mom. Go back to sleep."

There was the faint noise of rustling blankets and the creaking of a mattress as his mother readjusted herself in bed, then, already beginning to drift off again: "Night, Jonathan. I love you."

"Love you too," he said, voice smaller, suddenly feeling dangerously close to tears. He scrubbed at his eyes with his sleeve to stop them before they could fall.

He stood for an awkward few minutes in silence, until he was certain she was asleep, then heaved a heavy sigh, suddenly feeling exhausted.

"Lie," the girl- Eleven- said suddenly.

Jonathan blinked. "What?"

"You lied."

"I- yeah, I did. That was my mom, and she's... she's sick, okay? She got sick because she was very, very sad, and sometimes she can't tell what's real anymore. So... we're just going to let her sleep and not bother her with any of this."

Eleven stared at him for a long moment, then raised a hand to tap at her temple. "Sick... here?"

Jonathan nodded, tight-lipped, and broke eye contact to stare at the wall, unable to keep looking into those big, sad eyes. "Yeah."

"What's a... mom?" Six asked, and the honest confusion in his eyes hit Jonathan like a physical blow to the chest.

"A mom is the person who made you," he said after a long moment of trying to decide how to define such a fundamental concept, rubbing a hand through his hair. "She loves you and cares about you more than anything else. That's why my mom is sick. She cared too much."

Oh, Six mouthed, and tucked himself up against Eleven's side again.

"You don't... you don't have parents?"

"Papa," Eleven murmured. "Bad."

Her words only served to confirm what Jonathan had already more or less guessed- the kids were fleeing an abusive home. He understood awful fathers, and he meant it when he said, "He's not going to get you. Okay?"

Eleven nodded slowly, squeezing Six's hand.

"Okay," she whispered.

"You two, get some sleep," Jonathan said after a beat. "You're safe here."

They looked at him searchingly for a long minute, then seemed to find what they were looking for, because they turned as one and filed over to the undersized bed. As he watched, they both climbed in, seeming to have no reservations about sharing, and curled up together, holding each other tight.

Within minutes, they were fast asleep.

Jonathan smiled faintly, and turned out the light.

Hey, all! The first seven chapters or so should be up pretty quickly, since they're already written and posted on AO3 and I just need to reformat them.

A guide, because the names/numbers thing can get confusing:

006: Mike Wheeler - Pyrokinesis

007: Lucas Sinclair - [power not yet revealed]

008: Kali - Illusions (not in this story)

009: Maxine Mayfield - Electrokinesis

010: Dustin Henderson - [power not yet revealed]

011: Jane Ives - Telekinesis

012: Will Byers - Precognition

5. every word you say

When Hopper woke up, his head was pounding, and his brain felt like it was wrapped in cotton. He tried shaking his head to clear it, but that only worsened the headache and he regretted it immediately. He blinked his eyes open and got a split second glance of scattered empty beer cans and pill bottles before the sunlight stabbed into his eyes and pain shot right into his brain. He groaned and slammed them shut again, groping for details about what had happened last night.

There was nothing. The night before was a complete blank slate in his mind, inaccessible. Which was strange, because usually after drinking he could remember almost everything until passing out. He scrabbled uselessly for details, managing up come up with a few random images: hallways, water, stuffed animals-

Kids. That was right, there were kids. Kids who needed help. He grabbed that detail from the jumble of his memory and held onto it as everything began to come together again. There were... kids' rooms, and he had been at...

Hawkins Lab.

Joyce was right.

Joyce was right.

With that thought, he slowly forced his eyes open again, shielding them from the sun with one hand. The urge to close them, soothe his aching head and go back to sleep was strong, but he resisted it. He needed to call Joyce. Needed to talk to her, and tell her she was *right*, about the lab, about the children, about everything. Needed to find out what, exactly, she knew.

He struggled to his feet, bracing himself against the wall with one arm and making his way to the phone. He reached for it- and stopped.

They were listening. They had to be.

He took a step back and looked around the room, looking at all the appliances, all the places a microphone or a camera could hidden.

He sighed, and got to work.

Eleven drowsed awake slowly. She was warm, and safe, and with her brother. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt truly safe, without having to fear being hunted or tested or tormented. It wasn't perfect, of course; the bad men were still coming for them, and they would keep coming, they were separated from four of their siblings and *something* had happened to Twelve, something *bad*. It wasn't perfect, but for the moment, it was enough.

She sent out a directionless thought- *Hello?* -and waited hopefully for an answer from her missing siblings, but nothing came. They must have been too far away yet, or... something else, but she thought she would know if they were in trouble, and she knew/I she would know if any of them had been killed.

Six stirred next to her. If nothing else, he was still with her. He was safe.

They were safe.

She suddenly became aware of the soft cadence of speech nearby. It was too soft for her to make it out. She eased herself out of the bed, careful to slip out of her sleeping brother's arms without waking him. He needed his rest.

She padded across the floor, enjoying the feel of the plush carpet on the soles of her bare feet. It was so different from the cold, sterile halls of the laboratory where she'd lived her entire life. It was warm, and soft, and pleasant, all things that the laboratory had never been.

She supposed that this was what a home was supposed to be like.

She liked it.

She reached the door and eased it open, slowly so that it didn't creak. She knew the art of keeping quiet. They had all been raised in a place where they were tools to be used when needed and to draw no

attention the rest of the time. Silent, obedient little dolls.

The kind boy who had brought them home- Jonathan, Eleven remembered- was leaning against the wall with his back to her, holding something to his ear. A phone?

"The chief's not there yet?" he was asking, sounding worried, scrubbing his free hand through his hair as he spoke. "Well, what time does he usually get there? ...an hour ago, great. That's just... great. Can you ask him to call me back when he gets in? ...no, no, my mom is fine, it's not about that. It's-"

Eleven's eyes widened. A *call*. That's what this was. He was placing a call to someone who he thought could help.

Just like Benny.

Eleven thought of Benny, lying on the diner's greasy floor with his eyes wide in an almost comical expression of shock and a hole in his forehead the size of a dime. Benny who had fed them and been so angry on their behalf, so eager to get them justice, who was dead because of *them*. She thought of Jonathan, who had taken her and Six home and given them a place to sleep and let them feel *safe*, being shot between the eyes by the next retrieval team to come for them.

Collateral *damage*. That was a phrase she knew. It was one of Papa's favorites.

She reacted on instinct. She jerked her head to one side, hard, and the phone flew out of Jonathan's hand and smashed itself against the wall hard enough to crack the pink plastic casing.

Far away, a surveillance agent on one of the upper floors of Hawkins Lab frowned in mild confusion as the call he'd been listening in on suddenly dropped, the line going dead.

Jonathan whipped around, looking shocked and- terrified, and no, she didn't want that, she didn't want him to be frightened hoof her but this was important and she needed to make him *understand*.

"No," she said, trying to make her voice sound firm, trying to get rid of the quake of fear in her words and not succeeding.

Jonathan stared at her blankly for a moment, uncomprehending, then gestured at the phone, now dangling limply on the end of its cord, a few inches from the carpeting. "Did... you do that?"

"Not safe," she said, trying to find the right words to express the danger in her limited vocabulary, hating her inability to say what she meant. When she was talking to her siblings over their connection, she was always understood, but when speaking aloud she just didn't have enough *words*. "Bad men... listening."

"You think there's people listening to the phone call?" Jonathan repeated, and the disbelief in his voice was edged with caution. He didn't move for the phone again, which Eleven took as a good sign.

"Yes," she confirmed. "Bad men. They hear, and..." she trailed off again, wordlessly frustrated. After a moment of thinking, she folded her hand into a gun-shape, index finger extended, and pointed it at his chest.

"Like that," she whispered. "Gone."

The disbelief had mostly cleared from his face, she was relieved to see. Instead, there was concern. "Have you... seen that happen?"

She nodded slowly, thinking of the spray of blood on the far wall of the diner, of Benny's body collapsing bonelessly to the floor. She couldn't stop seeing it.

"...alright. Alright. But we're going to have to do something. This isn't... sustainable."

"Sustainable?" Eleven echoed, confused.

"Means we can't keep *going* like this," Jonathan defined. "Me hiding you in Will's room. I have school, and my mom to worry about, and... if there really are bad people after you, I don't want her getting hurt."

Eleven nodded. She understood the desire to protect family.

"I don't *know* how to fix this, okay? Which is why we need help. But first..." He pointed at the phone again. "How did you do that?"

Eleven slowly raised a finger and tapped it against her temple. "Here."

Jonathan's eyes widened with something she couldn't identify. Shock, or confusion, or...

Recognition?

All he said though, was, "...I have to go to school. Stay with your friend in the room and stay quiet until my mom leaves for work, then you can go around the house. We'll... we'll figure this out when I get home."

He shouldered a backpack onto his back, and Eleven startled backwards slightly, surprised, when a piece of bread sprang out of the toaster with a popping noise. Jonathan grabbed it and opened the door with his free hand.

He added, quickly, "Don't answer the door."

The door shut, and Eleven was alone.

Barb wasn't at school. That was the first thing Nancy noticed when she arrived. They always met up at her locker to talk at the start of the day and then walked to first period together, but Barb wasn't there. It wasn't like her to be late.

She'd figured Barb had just left the party early once she and Steve were... in his room (her cheeks felt hot just thinking about it), and she couldn't blame her, but she couldn't remember Barb missing a day of school in her life. Maybe she'd slept in?

But as the class periods wore on, and Barb still didn't show, Nancy grew more and more anxious. The teacher droned on in the background, but Nancy, usually an attentive student, couldn't even bring herself to listen, instead alternately staring at Barb's conspicuously empty desk and watching the door.

"Miss Wheeler? Mr. Byers? Is something more interesting than your education?" Mrs. Eddiman snapped, her voice sudden and piercing. Nancy snapped to attention, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw

Jonathan Byers do the same.

"N-no, Mrs. Eddiman," Nancy answered, shamefaced. "I'm sorry."

The teacher stared at her through the glasses perched on the end of her nose for a moment longer before nodding, apparently satisfied, and turning towards Jonathan, who squirmed under her gaze.

"I was distracted," he mumbled, staring fixedly at the surface of his desk. "Sorry."

The teacher's expression softened slightly. "Your mother?"

Jonathan looked like he'd swallowed something sour, and nodded jerkily. Nancy felt bad for him. He didn't deserve to have that discussed in front of the whole class- and indeed, Tommy and Carol were watching the show with undisguised glee.

"Well. I'm sorry, Mr. Byers, but school is a place for learning. I expect to see you taking notes. Now, in 1957-"

She found him after class.

"Hey," she said, and he looked up in surprise. Behind his bangs, his eyes were wide and shocked- the phrase *deer in the headlights* came immediately to mind and Nancy had to stifle a hysterical giggle. She pressed on regardless, too late to turn back now. "Are you okay?"

He stared at her for a moment longer, and she wondered how many people asked him that on a given day. She'd guess not many. "Fine," he said after the silence had stretched just long enough to be uncomfortable.

"She shouldn't have done that," Nancy said. "I'm sorry."

He shrugged one shoulder, still not meeting her eyes. "It's okay. It's... I'm used to it."

"That doesn't make it okay," Nancy objected with a frown, but Jonathan didn't reply. "Hey, you haven't seen Barb at school today, have you?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. "No. Sorry. Why?"

"She came with me to a party at Steve's," she explained, not sure why she was telling this to Jonathan Byers of all people. He didn't even *know* Barb. But who else was there? She'd heard Tommy calling Barb a dyke behind her back, heard Carol laugh like a hyena and even heard Steve chuckle a little. They wouldn't care. "She was gone in... the morning," she continued, cheeks reddening again as she realized she'd inadvertently revealed she'd spent the night at Steve Harrington's house. "I thought she'd just gone home, but... now I'm worried."

"No, I... haven't seen her today," Jonathan said. Nancy suddenly realized he was looking at her face closely, and she shifted uncomfortably.

"What are you looking at?" she asked, more defensively than she meant to, and he immediately looked away.

"Sorry. I just... you remind me of someone I met recently. You... do you have any cousins, or... I don't know..."

"Brothers?" she blurted before she could stop herself. He was looking at her curiously from under his bangs, and she had to pause to recollect herself. "I- no. I don't. I just have a little sister, but-"

She stopped. She was doing the exact same thing she hated her parents doing- lying and pretending like everything was *fine*. That there had never been any little brother, and there was just the two Wheeler daughters.

She was so tired of acting like everything was fine.

"I had a little brother," she said simply. "Or... I would have had one. My mom carried to term, and everything. He... um. He died."

"Oh- shit, I'm sorry, I didn't-" Jonathan stammered. Nancy shook her head.

"Know? It's okay. Nobody does. My parents like to pretend he never existed. He ruins their image of the 'perfect family.' It's... kind of nice to finally talk about it."

Jonathan nodded, and the slightest touch of a wry smile graced his lips. It occurred to Nancy, all of a sudden, that she didn't think she'd ever seen him smile before. "Guess we've got more in common than we thought."

It took Nancy a split second before she remembered- miscarrying a baby boy was what had sent Joyce Byers over the edge. They were both big siblings to dead brothers.

It was such a morbid thing to bond over, but she found herself mirroring his smile anyways. "Guess so."

Jonathan opened his mouth, paused, then closed it again. The smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared, like the sun behind a cloud, and Nancy frowned.

"What is it?"

He shifted on his feet, again looking anywhere but her face. When he spoke, the words sounded like they were being dragged out of him against his will. "I didn't see Barb *today*. But... *fuck*. You're going to think I'm such a creep. I... was in the woods last night, taking pictures, and I saw... here."

Nancy watched as he rummaged through his bag, eventually producing a black-and-white photograph. He handed it over to her, and she frowned down at it.

She recognized it immediately. It was Barb, sitting on the diving board with her feet in the water. The low lighting combined with the graininess of the picture served to partially obscure her face, but she looked sad. Nancy felt a pang of guilt. She shouldn't have left her out there like that.

She looked back up at Jonathan. "You took this?"

He nodded once, still staring steadfastly at the ground. "I-I heard the music, and came to see what was going on. It... I thought it was a good picture, that's all. I took it, and then I looked down to rewind my camera, and... she was gone. The pool light was out, too. I figured she'd just gone inside, but. Now I don't know."

Nancy didn't respond right away, instead focused on examining the picture closer. You could see Steve's bedroom window from where he had taken it from, and her cheeks got involuntarily hot again as she realized Jonathan might have seen them up there together. Then, any embarrassment was forgotten as she noticed something else.

"What's this?" she asked, holding out the photo and tapping on the slim grey shape on the far right. Jonathan squinted at it for a moment, but shook his head, looking just as bewildered as she felt.

"I... don't know," he admitted. "Could be a distortion, but I wasn't using a wide-angle lens. Could be a problem with the negative..."

"Is there any way to know?"

"Yeah, if I redeveloped the picture and enlarged that part, we could get a clearer look at-"

The bell rang, and Nancy suddenly realized that the halls had emptied as they were talking, leaving them alone as everyone else went to their next class. From the stunned look on Jonathan's face, he'd lost track of time as well.

"Um, can we meet after school? To talk more?" Nancy asked hopefully, shouldering her bag again and glancing down the hall. Hopefully her parents wouldn't get called about her being late to class.

Jonathan hesitated. "I have some other stuff I need to take care of after school, but... I guess so. Meet me in the school darkroom after seventh period."

"We have a *darkroom*?" Nancy asked.

Jonathan laughed and turned away, already moving towards the stairs. "In the basement by the art room," he called over his shoulder.

"See you there!" she called back.

Steve Harrington was not in a great mood.

His day had *started out* awesome. He'd scored with Nancy Wheeler,

Hawkins' resident Perfect Girl, and it had been as perfect as everything else about her. He'd *thought* nothing could ruin the day after that, but he'd been wrong, because he'd overheard her making *afterschool plans* with *Jonathan Byers*, the freak with the crazy mom, of all people.

Seriously. The *darkroom*? There was no way they were just going to be 'developing photos/i' in there. No way.

He'd been tempted to head there himself and interrupt their little rendezvous, but he'd decided against it- partly because missing too many more basketball practices would disqualify him from lettering, mostly because it didn't seem like *enough*. He'd work out some other way to get back at Miss Good Girl Nancy Wheeler.

So he'd gone to practice, and played worse than usual while Nance and the freak were probably getting it on in the darkroom, and steadily worked himself into a darker and darker mood until by the end of practice he just wanted to punch Jonathan Byers in his pretentious little shit face.

His mood was not improved when he got home and saw a kid in a dress napping on his porch. He looked like one of those cancer kids you saw in the Red Cross Donate Now commercials- too thin, head shaved, wearing a plastic hospital gown with a simplistic yellow flowery pattern.

Steve stared for a moment, but confused impatience and the bad mood that had been festering all day soon won out over the gentle approach.

"Kid. Hey, kid, wake the hell up," he demanded irritably. The boy blinked once, groaned softly, then big brown eyes flicked up to Steve's face. The change in demeanor was immediate- the moment the boy realized there was someone else there with him, he snapped the rest of the way awake and scrambled backwards with his hands and feet until his back bumped against the front door, making it rattle softly in his frame.

The clear terror in the boy's eyes made Steve feel a little guilty, but he pressed on. "What are you doing here, huh? This is my house. Go

home."

"Sorry," the boy babbled, shaking, and Steve noticed he had a noticeable lisp. "Sorry, sorry, sorry. Sorry. Felt... safe. Here. Sorry."

"Stop saying sorry," Steve ordered, feeling steadily worse about obviously terrifying the poor kid out of his wits.

"Sorry," the kid said again. Steve mentally gave up.

"Look, are you, uh, lost, or something?"

The boy nodded, seeming to calm down slightly. That was good, because Steve was in no way equipped to deal with a hysterical little kid. "Lost friends."

"O-kay. Do... you live near here?"

The boy tensed up again- dammit, he thought they'd been making progress- and shook his head wildly. "No. No no no. Not... back there."

Steve sighed, goodwill beginning to evaporate in favor of impatience. "I'm not gonna make you go anywhere except *off my porch*, okay?"

The boy nodded jerkily and pushed himself to his feet, edging carefully around Steve and down the stairs. Once he was standing, it was even more obvious how unhealthily thin and skeletal he looked. Steve kind of felt like an asshole watching the kid walk slowly down the sidewalk, looking completely forlorn.

He shoved the feeling aside, went inside, plopped down the couch and tried to watch the football game and relax, but he couldn't focus. Less than five minutes in, he found himself thinking about the kid again, the dirt on his face and the fear on his eyes.

A few minutes after that, a soft tapping sound drew his eyes to the window, and he saw it'd started to rain.

"Goddammit," he swore under his breath.

Luckily, the boy hadn't made it too far- only a couple blocks. He was

still slowly walking down the sidewalk, staring down at his feet, getting slowly soaked as the rain fell heavier.

"Kid! Hey, kid!"

The other two children, Seven and Nine, were together. After the attack on the diner, they'd fled in the opposite direction from many of the others- not towards the town, but instead deeper into the woods. They were tucked into the roots of an oversized tree, trying to hide from the impromptu rainstorm.

As the rainfall began to abate though, and the sun began to shine through once more, the children grew restless. The girl elbowed the boy and nodded towards the top of the tree with an excited smile, reverting to their old speechless language out of habit.

Race you to the top?

The boy, busy scanning the woods around them, shook his head. *Not safe.*

Come on! she urged. *You'll be able to see better from the top.*

Her bright smile won him over, and he found himself softening, smiling back. There was nothing he wouldn't do for her, and they both knew it. She'd do the same for him- and in the absence of all their other siblings, taking care of each other was more important than ever.

Fine, he acquiesced. Nine whooped aloud and bolted for the nearest branch. Seven followed at a more careful pace, but once she called down a taunt from several feet above him, he grinned and threw caution to the wind, quickly catching up to her.

The next few minutes were filled with wordless laughter, the sound of creaking branches, and the soft thuds of pine cones that their climb had shaken loose falling to the ground.

Then, the air was pierced by a snapping sound, and the branch disappeared from under Seven's feet. His eyes widened for just a moment before he began to fall- and then her hand closed around his

wrist, stopping him short. She hauled him up, shoulders shaking with the exertion, and after a terrifying moment he could reach the more solid branch she was perched on and clawed himself onto it, collapsing next to her.

For a long minute, the only sound was their ragged breathing.

Then, a touch smugly, Nine whispered, *I win*.

Seven laughed aloud and shoved her playfully, gentle enough that there would be no danger of her falling off of the branch. *You win*.

They fell into a comfortable silence, staring out over the expanse of forest laid out below them.

They didn't see the soldiers moving silently through the underbrush.

006: Mike Wheeler - Pyrokinesis

007: Lucas Sinclair - [power not yet revealed]

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012: Will Byers - Precognition

6. every claim you stake

The trap slid shut silently. The soldiers positioned themselves just out of sight in the underbrush around the clearing at the base of the tree, surrounding it completely. Doctor Brenner nodded a signal to the sniper beside him, who took careful aim up at the two silhouettes, clear targets against the blue sky.

One second, Nine and Seven were watching the dim autumn sun begin to arc lazily down towards the horizon, enjoying the moment of sweet, peaceful freedom.

Then there was the muffled crack of a silenced rifle, shattering the calm serenity, and Nine made a small, pained groan as the sleep dart pierced her skin, and Seven reached for her a moment too late, and then she was falling.

Seven didn't think.

He *acted*.

He'd never done anything with his powers at such a distance before, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except saving her. He thrust his hands downward, a sharp pain pinging in the front of his mind, and the air beneath her froze, crystallized, and formed a thick cushion of snow beneath her moments before she hit the ground.

The soldiers emerged from the bushes, two of them approaching her half-conscious and battered body with- was that a *collar*?

Seven saw red.

No.

He jumped.

The impact sent shock up his legs, but the snow caught him, cradled him. He positioned himself defensively over her, glaring daggers at the approaching soldiers. They wisely paused, and one of them look a step back.

A drop of blood fell from his nose, and splattered scarlet on the snow.

"Leave... her... alone," he said, voice shaking slightly with fear and fury and exertion, as he felt the power build up in his fingertips and behind his temples, ready to be unleashed. He held onto it, letting it accumulate.

If they went here, at least they wouldn't go quietly.

"Stand down," commanded a voice that was so horribly familiar. Seven almost lost control, nearly froze everything around him on instinct as pain fear pain papa/i echoed through his head.

Doctor Brenner- *Papa*- stepped forward, the line of soldiers parting to make way for him.

"Seven," he said, a warmth in his voice that crawled across Seven's skin and made him shudder. "What do you think you're doing out here?"

Seven didn't answer.

Brenner took a step closer, and Seven tensed, but he didn't make any other moves. He just crouched down to look at Nine, who was still half-asleep. A small groan escaped her when he entered her field of vision, and she shuffled backwards as well as she could on unresponsive limbs. "Hello, Nine."

"Leave her *alone*," Seven repeated, the words curling into a snarl. Brenner just shook his head, like he was disappointed in them, like Seven was being an unreasonable, disobedient child.

"Look at her, Seven. She's hurt. You don't look well either. I don't know why you decided to do this to yourselves, but listen. It's not *safe* out here. I have always cared for you as if you were my own. Out here, there is no one to feed you, or heal you when you're hurt. You need to come *home*, Seven," Brenner said, sounding so earnest that for just a moment, a prickle of doubt edged into his mind.

Then Nine made another broken, pained sound, and sent him a panicked, almost incoherent thought- *no no no no blood pain walls no tests no pain no*- and any doubts melted away, replaced by steely

determination.

"Leave us alone," he said one more time, hands curling into fists. Brenner didn't seem to notice. The pain and power was pounding inside his head, making it difficult to think about anything else.

"You know I can't do that, Seven," Brenner said. "Last chance. Come home willingly, and I won't have to resort to... distasteful methods."

Out of the corner of his eye, Seven saw sunlight glinting off metal as the soldier who had sniped Nine raised his gun.

"I *said*," he said slowly, struggling to piece together phrases through the fog of pain in his head, "*leave... us... alone!*"

The dam broke. First the cold came like a physical blow, dropping the clearing fifty degrees in a matter of seconds, and then a split second after came the ice. It raced across the ground and crawled up the legs of the soldiers, fixing them in place. Frost iced over their guns, rendering them useless as some of them tried to shoot.

Brenner scrambled backwards frantically before the creeping ice could reach him, and Seven managed a weak grin, because seeing his condescending composure slip was *entirely worth* the pain.

He pulled Nine to her feet. The sedative must have been wearing off, because after a moment of struggle she managed to stay upright. They leaned on each other heavily as they worked their way back towards the safety of the tree line.

As they reached the edge of the clearing, Seven could hear Papa yelling behind them, pleas and threats and promises.

They didn't look back.

It took several hours and the destruction of almost everything in his trailer, but after finding (and smashing) three microphones and a little bulb he thought was probably a camera, Hopper was satisfied with the security of his home. The new problem (because of course there was one) was that he could no longer call Joyce even with all the surveillance equipment gone, because he'd dismembered his

phone in his search.

(Unbeknownst to him, the Byers home phone had been rendered completely useless several hours before when Eleven had violently smashed it against the wall, ironically to prevent Jonathan from contacting Hopper, rendering the entire point moot.)

He checked his watch and swore. He was supposed to be at work ages ago. Flo had to be both worried out of her mind and absolutely *pissed*. He was not looking forward to the lecture he was going to get by the time he got in. First, though, he needed to do something else.

He had to find Joyce.

She was at work, and as Hopper shouldered his way through the swinging door, the little bell mounted on the door frame gave a high-pitched *ding!*

"Joyce. Can you take a break?"

She blinked twice. "Hop? What're you doing here? Where were you this morning? I've been trying to call you all day."

"I need to talk to you. Somewhere not here. Can you take a break?"

"My shift's almost done. What's this about?"

"Not here."

Joyce gave a strained laugh as she moved out from behind the checkout counter. "Careful, Hop. You're starting to sound like me."

She waited for him to laugh too, but he couldn't see anything funny about the situation.

"Alright. Okay. *Donald!*" she called to the back of the general store. "*My shift's over, I'm gonna head home!*"

"*Alright, have a good day, Joyce,*" Hopper heard her boss call faintly back.

Donald was a good man. Kind enough to give Joyce a job even when her... issues meant she wasn't the best worker, and wise enough to only give her short shifts with relatively easy jobs to do. Hopper was pretty sure he paid her a little more than he needed to, too. He ought to take him out for a beer sometime.

"Where're we going?" she asked quietly as they left the store together.

"Library. I need your help to look some things up. And on the way, I want you to tell me everything you know about Hawkins Lab... and Will."

"You're... listening to me. You're actually listening to me?" she said, and the overjoyed disbelief in her voice was genuine enough to hurt.

"Joyce. I've *always* listened to you. I just... didn't believe you. And I'm sorry for that. I'm gonna make it right."

"What- Hop, what happened? Why now?"

He looked around as inconspicuously as he could before answering. With most adults at work and most kids at school, combined with the onset of fall driving most folks either indoors or out into the woods to hunt, the sidewalks were mostly empty, so he felt comfortable lowering his voice and saying, "I broke into the lab."

He stopped, turned to face her. She stared up at him, hope lighting her face and making her look more alive, more *there*, than she had in years.

"You were right. You were right this whole time."

Steve wasn't entirely sure how he'd gotten into this situation.

Found cancer kid on his doorstep, check. Told said kid to shove off and then felt guilty about it, check. Ran after kid in the rain and made himself look like a dumbass to tell him he could come inside after all, check. He'd meant to just harbor him until the rain stopped, and then maybe drive him to the police station or something and let them take care of him. He understood how all that had happened.

He didn't understand how, several hours later, the kid was sitting on his couch wearing some of his old hand-me-downs, methodically working his way through an entire tub of chocolate ice cream he'd found in Steve's freezer while watching *The Empire Strikes Back*.

He really needed to stop thinking of him as *the kid*.

"What's your name, anyway?" he asked, plopping down on the couch next to the kid. Those frightened brown eyes flicked up to meet him.

"You have one, don't you?" Steve pressed when no answer was forthcoming, because... *shit*, even if the kid came from bad circumstances or whatever, everybody had a *name*.

The boy wedged the spoon back into the slowly melting ice cream and held out his wrist. Steve had to tilt his head awkwardly to read the digits tattooed there.

"Ten?" he read aloud, confused tone making the word into a question. "That's not a name, kid. That's a number."

"Mine," the boy- Ten, apparently- muttered.

"Well, I'm not calling you that."

Ten shrugged, apparently ambivalent, still entirely focused on the screen as Yoda instructed Luke on the ways of the Force.

"It okay if I just keep calling you kid?"

Ten cocked his head thoughtfully to the side, then nodded.

"Alright, kid, quit hogging the ice cream."

"You take the Times, I'll take the Post, and we'll work our way through."

"And- Hopper, w-what are we looking for, exactly?"

"Stories. Like yours."

Twelve wanted to go home.

Not back to the lab. That place had never been their home. It had been their prison, and on some occasions he'd thought it would be their tomb as well. But they'd managed to escape, and they were never, ever going back.

Living in a place didn't make it a home, anyways. It was people that made a home.

Twelve's home was where his friends, his brothers and sisters were, the closest people to him in the world. No matter where they were, if he was with them, he was home.

Now he just needed to get back to them.

He'd been quick and lucky so far. The... *thing* that had dragged him into this place was a terrifyingly efficient hunter, but it was also apparently blind, which at least gave him a chance of hiding from it, and he usually got warning of its attacks a minute or so in advance thanks to his gift.

He couldn't go on like this forever, though. He knew he couldn't. With nothing to eat and never getting more than an hour or two of sleep at a time due to fear of being caught, his strength was draining rapidly. He wished he had his friends with him. Even just one, someone whose talents could actually help fight the monster instead of running away. Six would know what to do. It was a selfish wish, he knew, because they were certainly better off far away from him and the monster and this dark dimension, but he found himself wishing it all the same.

The warning flash of teeth and grey, slimy skin appeared in front of his eyes, and he ran.

He needed to find a way out.

"I found something!" Joyce said suddenly, loud in the quiet of the library, making Hopper start. He turned away from his own screen to face her.

"Me too. What do you got?"

"Claudia Henderson. Single mom, lives-oh. Lived in Indianapolis. Her two-month-old son died in the crib around eleven years ago, and she insisted that he wasn't dead. That he was kidnapped. She... um. She killed herself seven years ago after getting laughed out of every newspaper she tried to bring the story to."

She fell silent, and Hopper was sure she was thinking the same thing he was- that could so easily have been her. If she'd lived in a bigger city, if she hadn't had Jonathan to think about... if she hadn't had someone at the police station who was always willing to take her calls.

"I found one too," he said finally, breaking the silence. "Fred and Amelia Sinclair. Their son Lucas died shortly after being born. They made a ruckus for awhile, brought a case for medical malpractice and got a settlement, and... well, *she* quieted down, but he kept going for a while. Then he stopped too, all of a sudden. Apparently they moved to Chicago."

The silence fell again, heavier and suffocating, as the sheer scope of the operation began to dawn on them. Hopper didn't know what had happened to make Fred Sinclair quiet down about his son, but he was damned sure the man hadn't just given up.

"Joyce... I think you should stop taking those pills."

She was quiet for a moment, then, sounding slightly sheepish but unrepentant: "...I haven't been taking them for a month and a half."

He couldn't help it. He snorted, because she really had been right about everything all along, and all of a sudden they were both laughing, filling the library with much-needed amusement until Jeanette at the front desk shot them a dark glare.

For the next few minutes, their search was accompanied only by the clicking of the microfilm viewers until a realization slid into place in Hopper's head, and he blinked.

"Joyce."

"What?"

"You know the Wheelers?"

"Sort of. Not well. Karen tried to give me a casserole after Will was... taken and told me she was sorry for my loss. I slapped her across the face and told her to get out of my house. We don't get along." She paused, then, with disbelieving shock, "You don't think they..."

"I don't know," he cut her off. "I just remembered... you know their daughter, Nancy? I think it was about five years ago, cause I'd just come back to Hawkins and rejoined the department. She was maybe ten. Came up to me one day and said she'd like to report a crime."

"A crime?" Joyce echoed.

"Yeah. She said her little brother had been kidnapped."

"The Wheelers don't... have a son," Joyce said, but her tone turned it into a question.

"No. They don't. I went and asked them about it, and apparently Karen had a miscarriage a long time ago, that's it, end of story. They didn't want to talk about it, and I got the sense they weren't pleased with Nancy for telling me either. At the time, I thought it was probably just a kid being a kid and not really being able to understand what had happened, but..." he trailed off.

"But now you think she might have been onto something," Joyce finished for him.

"Yeah."

The girl who might have been onto something, in the meantime, was squinting into a tray, watching as a photo slowly developed. Jonathan was a few steps behind her, trying to give her as much respectful space as was possible in the cramped darkroom, and observing the complete focus on her face. He wished he could take a picture of it.

Suddenly, she gasped, and he moved closer to look over her shoulder

at the photo as it came into focus.

"There," she said, stabbing at the still-developing picture with one finger, fascination and revulsion mingling in her voice. "What is that?"

With the picture enlarged so much, there could be no more doubt that there was *something* there. It looked sort of like a person, at least in basic shape, but the proportions were strange and the apparent lack of a face made it look so deeply, viscerally *wrong*.

Jonathan had been maybe twenty feet away from that thing when he'd taken the picture, which was a revelation that made him feel nauseous. He hadn't even known it was there.

"Well, it's definitely not a distortion," he managed after a moment, and was rewarded with her laugh, which had a distinctly hysterical note to it.

"I don't care what it is," Nancy decided firmly after a moment. Jonathan admired the way she looked when she was set on something- strong, determined, and completely different from the perfect, straight-A suburban girl he'd always written her off as. "I want to find it. Maybe if we do..."

The we did not escape Jonathan's notice. "...we might find Barbara, too."

"Exactly."

She straightened, and looked him directly in his eyes. "I- I don't want to drag you into this any further, but... I feel like if I tell anybody else, they'll think I'm crazy. You don't have to, but-"

"I'll help," he interrupted, surprising himself. He had two kids at home who he still didn't know what to do about and who could do things with their minds he *really* didn't want to think too hard about, and...

...his train of thought slammed to a halt as a lot of things came together all at once.

She really did look like Six. Not in the traditional way- her hair and eyes were lighter, and obviously she looked much healthier, but... Jonathan knew faces. He studied them as a hobby. They had the same cheekbones, the same nose.

She was still talking, but he couldn't hear her. All he could hear was his mom, rambling about babies being kidnapped at birth, about children being turned into weapons, and he thought about the phone flying out of his hand, about the fact that Nancy's baby brother had disappeared.

Guess we've got more in common than we thought.

"Jonathan?" Nancy was saying, sounding worried, and he finally blinked out of his trance.

"Nancy," he said slowly, "are you absolutely certain that your brother is dead?"

She stared at him in stunned silence for a long moment and he just had time to think he had ruined their budding friendship and was about to get punched in the face before she whispered, "...how did you know that?"

"I," he started, then stopped. His throat was suddenly too dry to talk, because if Six really was Nancy's brother, and he really had been kidnapped and hadn't died at birth, then that meant-

That meant.

He couldn't think about that.

"I think there's someone you should meet."